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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000199

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SUBJECT: LUKASHENKO FOR PRESIDENT OF RUSSIA?

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

11. (SBU) In late February, relatively unknown Moscow artist turned political activist Aleksandr Kanurin announced a movement to nominate Belarusian President Lukashenko as a candidate for the 2008 Russian presidential elections. The movement's website solicits people to register their names and remarks in support of Lukashenko's nomination. In an obvious and ridiculous smear campaign, Belarusian opposition leaders, critics of the regime who have long passed away, and members of Lukashenko's circle allegedly registered their support. Included in the website are anti-Western news articles, jokes mocking the Belarusian opposition, and dramatic photos and portraits of Lukashenko. We agree with local analysts' assessment that Lukashenko is probably funding the campaign to irritate Putin and to increase his popular support at home. Regardless of his motives, no one here is taking the movement seriously. End summary.

"Batka For President"

12. (SBU) The Belarusian version of Russian newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda (KP) on February 28 announced that a new website, www.lukashenko2008.ru, appeared on the Russian web portal seeking Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko's nomination as a candidate for the 2008 Russian presidential elections. Titled "The People's Movement: Lukashenko 2008," the site asks Lukashenko supporters to register their names on a petition seeking Lukashenko's nomination to run for president of Russia. Creator of the movement -- self-proclaimed Moscow artist Aleksey Kanurin -- called Lukashenko the "only real alternative" to improving the Russian way of life, noting in a February 28 interview with KP that Belarusians lived well because they did not sell their economy to the West. (Note: Kanurin also admitted that he had never visited Belarus. End note.) Kanurin claimed Lukashenko was not consulted, because he wanted to first create the necessary conditions in Russia (hinting at a change in the constitution) that would allow Lukashenko to choose whether he wants to participate or not.

Belarus: The Center of Russian Civilization

13. (SBU) At first glance, the website seems well financed. Aside from portraits of Lukashenko as a knight and edited photographs of the President that are reminiscent of Don Corleone, the home page contains a news, contact, and humor

section containing propaganda similar to that produced by Lukashenko's state media. Claiming to be the only source of "independent" media, the language of the articles proves to the contrary:

--"Today, Belarus is the center of Russian civilization;"
--"The Belarusian opposition (opposition for dollars) arrived to their masters across the ocean to get their wages and instructions;"
--"Dark forces are strengthening pressure on the last independent country in Europe (Belarus)."

14. (SBU) The humor section displays cartoons of de facto coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich being kissed on the cheek by U.S. President Bush, as a marionette doll dancing for money, and as Dr. Howell from Gilligan's Island. The face of Leonid Poznyak, leader in exile of the Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian National Front, is pasted into the images of rapper Eminem and Superman.

Support Batka For President

15. (SBU) By March 2, approximately 700 people allegedly registered on the website their support for Lukashenko's nomination, including Vasiliy Bykov, the famous Belarusian poet and critic of Lukashenko who passed away in 2003. According to the register, on February 24, 2007 the late Bykov entered his name and stressed that Lukashenko would revive and strengthen Belarusian art, literature, and culture; "For the people's president!" Equally outlandish, ardent Belarusian opposition leaders and activists supposedly gave their support. On February 25, for example, jailed leader of the opposition youth movement Maladiy Front Pavel Severinets allegedly wrote on the site's message board that

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Lukashenko had the best policy on the youth and, if elected as Russian president, would revive patriotism and protect children from the destructive influences of pro-American organizations, such as Maladiy Front. Other opposition activists who allegedly signed the register include United Civic Party (UCP) leader Anatoliy Lebedko, Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) leader Sergey Kalyakin, and independent economist and outspoken Lukashenko critic Stanislav Bogdankevich. Members of Lukashenko's circle also allegedly stated their support, including Central Election Committee Head Lidiya Yermoshina and Former Minister of Sports and Tourism Yuriy Sivakov.

Luka Wants Ratings Boost

16. (C) Belarusian political analysts including Vladimir Podgol and Valeriy Karbalevich have told us that Lukashenko was likely financing the movement, not to seek the Russian presidency (as he knows President Putin would not allow it), but simply to annoy Putin and to increase his domestic popularity. Podgol reasoned that if the Kremlin takes measures to ensure the movement does not materialize, Lukashenko would use his domestic state propaganda to make himself look like a strong leader falling victim to Russian aggression, as the Kremlin is allegedly "frightened" of his popularity in Russia. Consequently, Podgol explained, Lukashenko's domestic ratings would dramatically increase.

Comment

17. (C) Nobody here, including post, takes the movement seriously. The Belarusian state media, the primary source of information for Belarusians, has not mentioned its existence and director Kanurin is, according to U.S. Embassy Moscow's sources, a political nobody in Russia. It is likely that Lukashenko is funding the site, but his motivations, other

than to annoy Putin, are unclear. The tacky artwork, fire and brimstone articles, and the "support" from sworn Lukashenko enemies, alive and dead, further demonstrate the absurdity of the campaign.

Stewart